

BOOKS

A matter of santization

Matter of Intelligence. By George Wittman. Macmillan. 238 pages. \$7.95.

One fine July day in 1963 a Roman Catholic priest in Amsterdam, N.Y., and a housewife in Norwalk, Conn., abruptly found themselves discombobulated. Via glaring headlines they had just learned that a Washington couple carrying their full names (and her maiden name) had been arrested by the FBI on charges of attempting to steal American missile secrets on behalf of the Soviet Government. The guilt was proven; the couple was unknown to the priest and the housewife. What on earth had happened?

What had happened was that the North American Department of the First Chief Directorate within the KGB

(Soviet Intelligence Service) had fouled up. Its case officer handling this particular operation had neglected to make certain that the priest and the housewife (of Lithuanian and Russian ancestry, respectively) were no longer in the land of the living. For a blunder of such magnitude the fate of that case officer would be interesting to learn.

This sort of real-life situation forms the springboard for the plot of a first novel by an author whose occupation is that of political and economic adviser to firms with overseas commitments. It is a good novel, not 'way up there with Deighton or Le Carre but not hopelessly out of their range either.

"Alex Schneider," a young Russian guerilla fighter in the last days of World War II, is

selected by the (then) NKVD to take the place of an American orphan recently deceased in Occupied Vienna whose aunts in far-off Michigan remain unaware of his demise. After thorough training the youth is dispatched to the United States as a deep-cover, long-range espionage agent. Over the years he succeeds in becoming a government consultant and also a staff member of a Think Tank (author Wittman has had connections with the Hudson Institute). To make matters A-1, it is not long ere the Central Intelligence Agency itself attempts to lure Alex from his employers and groom him for certain sensitive anti-Soviet operations. Here is the dream "penetration" of any intelligence service.

But then statecraft brandishes its bulky paw. The Politburo needs to procure data on a new American laser device, knowledge of which would render our opponents virtually impregnable in the SALT bargainings. So the Buro decrees that Alex obtain the monograph, even at the possible risk of failure and resultant exposure. He succeeds. But so does another equally high-level spy (this one a native American). An imbroglio ensues, and the rest of the story focusses on a "sanitization," i. e., elimination, program.

Mr. Wittman's characterizations are good, his narrative suspenseful. Several of the scenes—especially one at the Pentagon and an assassination episode—are well done. There is, to be sure, the well-worn analogy between the KGB and the CIA; but the former is not glamorized, and the latter, mercifully, is sketched with some sympathy and insight. Mr. Wittman is, indeed, quite up to his prefatory note's aim of telling "a reasonable story of the dark side of international politics—a bizarre world to those outside, a highly rational world to itself." To see just how adequate he is, check his KGB allusions against that comprehensive authority, John Barron's "KGB" (1974).

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